

Visual Aids

By Ladybugkay

What if Justin was in the diner when Debbie threatened Loretta's husband in 504?

Part One

He's hopelessly lost in a sketch he's working on, sitting in a corner booth of the diner, when he hears the crack of the bat.

His head jerks up in surprise, and when he sees Debbie standing there, brandishing the baseball bat like a weapon, all the air in his lungs leaves him in one wheezing breath, and the pencil in his hand drops into his lap.

There is something mesmerizing about the scene and the way she just stands there, and even though he desperately wants to, Justin can't look away. It's all he can do to keep from screaming, and he tries to force back the whimper crawling up from the back of his throat. He's grateful that everyone else in the diner doesn't notice him. They're too busy looking at Debbie and her showdown with someone Justin can't see because he can't look away from the piece of wood that represents the worst fear he's ever known. No one is paying any attention to the scared little boy who wants to run away but who can't feel his feet, and the moment just stretches out, longer and longer, until he thinks he might have to be the one to break it by either wetting himself or running out the door to go look frantically for Brian.

Finally, finally, Debbie seems to win whatever battle she's been fighting.

But Justin could have told her that; the one with the bat always wins.

So there are cheers and congratulations echoing in his ears as Justin stumbles out the door, leaving, for the first time, without paying his bill. He will never recall how he makes it back to the loft. One moment he is vomiting the remains of his chocolate shake and cheeseburger onto the curb in front of the diner, and the next he is sitting in the bottom of the shower, shaking under the spray of water that's been running so long it's ice-cold.

It's been years since something has hit him this hard, and Justin feels as if he's fallen back through time. Back to when something like this was a regular occurrence and Brian had become an expert on putting him back together.

But this time, Justin manages to pull himself together before Brian gets back, and then he does everything he can to act normally. Because it's Hard Heroes night at Babylon, and Brian's been working like a fiend to get everything just right for his big attempt to seduce Michael back into the club scene. And Justin has his suspicions that this is one pitch of Brian's that won't be successful, so he'll have to keep an eye on Brian tonight and keep him from becoming too depressed.

And if he finds himself trembling periodically throughout the evening, it's fine; he tells Brian it's just because they're keeping Babylon cooler than usual to make the superheroes' nipples clearly visible beneath the spandex. Brian's so busy watching the door he is barely listening, anyway, and Justin gets away with excuses weaker than the coffee at the diner when Debbie's not working.

Except that thoughts of Debbie make Justin think of her standing there wielding a fucking baseball bat, and he can't handle that, right now, so he pulls Brian into the backroom for a quick fuck to calm him down. They've both been distracted tonight, but it's impossible to stay that way when Brian pushes inside him, and Justin lets everything else go and gives himself over to Brian, completely.

It's okay. It's fine. He's fine. It's all over, now, and he just needs to put it behind him, the way he has everything else, and not think about it.

Which works about as well as it did with his anger over the bashing in the first place.

So when he wakes up gasping that night, barely an hour after they fall asleep, Justin isn't really surprised. The nightmares are a fairly regular problem, anyway, and he tries to convince himself this one wasn't the worst he's had in years, even as he tries to convince Brian he's alright.

Brian is used to Justin's dreams, too, and even though he hates, more than anything, something waking him up when he hasn't had enough sleep, he never snaps at Justin when his bad dreams disturb both their rests. Instead, Brian rubs his back and talks softly, reassuring him that it was just a dream, they're both alright, and there isn't anyone else here.

Justin can't find the words to tell him that this time it was Debbie who bashed his brains in and left him bleeding and dying on the floor of the diner, while she walked off into the sunset holding hands with the new waitress. He lets Brian soothe him until his heart is beating at a less alarming rate, and then he listens to Brian's breath become deep and slow, before finally falling asleep himself.

But barely half an hour later, Justin wakes up screaming and almost hits Brian in the face with his flailing arms. This time, he wakes only to fall headlong into a panic attack, and for long minutes, he can't determine what's real and what's not. Brian is nearly as frantic as Justin, trying everything he can think of to calm him down, and eventually, Justin finds himself sitting on the edge of the bed, clinging desperately to Brian's arms with white-knuckled fingers and suspiciously wet cheeks. Brian is kneeling in front of him with his hands on Justin's hips and his eyes on Justin's face.

"What happened, today?" Brian's voice is low and quiet, and he asks the question carefully.

"Nothing," Justin says, forcing himself to relax his grip, even if he can't let go, yet.

"Bullshit." Brian stands and moves to sit beside Justin, which makes Justin shift and turn sideways on the bed so that he can keep holding on to Brian. "Two in one night, plus a panic attack? It hasn't been this bad since the first few months after--. What happened?"

Justin lets go of Brian and reaches up with his right hand to scratch absently at the back of his head. "There was just this thing at the diner."

“Uh-huh. What ‘thing?’”

Justin looks away from the intensity in Brian’s gaze, but he can’t seem to keep his eyes focused on any one thing for longer than half a second. He really doesn’t want to have to say this, to admit to being this pathetic so many years after the fact, especially in front of Brian. But Brian is impossible to resist when he puts his mind to something, and Justin knows he’ll have to tell him the truth when Brian’s hand touches the side of Justin’s neck and moves his head until he has no choice but to look Brian in the face.

“Justin. It’s okay. Just tell me what happened.”

He looks at Brian and tries to find the right way to say this. “...I was trying to finish that sketch I’ve been working on before my hand gave out, so I’m not sure exactly what was going on. All I really know is that it had something to do with Loretta.”

“Who the fuck is Loretta?”

“The new waitress at the diner. You know, the one who replaced Deb?”

Brian nods his head, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on Justin’s.

“There was this really loud bang, and she was suddenly just there—Debbie, I mean. And she was--”

“She was what?”

“I think she was trying to protect Loretta or something, but she had--. She was holding...” Justin stumbles to a halt, but Brian nods at him to continue, and he forces himself to say the rest, all at once, so that he can just get it out. Out of his mouth, and maybe even out of his head. “She was threatening someone with this baseball bat, and I got a little freaked out.”

Brian’s face goes perfectly still, but there’s something terrible in his eyes, and Justin isn’t sure if it’s pain or rage or something he would like to call love. But it’s there, swirling behind his eyes, and his hand on Justin’s neck tightens noticeably.

Brian’s voice is still low and quiet, but it’s strained when he asks, “How freaked out?”

Justin winces. “Well, I got the hell out of there as soon as I could, and I wound up leaving my lunch in the street.” He laughs a little, but he’s not surprised when Brian doesn’t. It’s not that funny. “Then I came back here and apparently hid in the shower for long enough to outlast the hot water tank. Oh, and I think I skipped out on the check. So I guess you could call it a level 6, maybe 7, freak-out.”

He holds Brian’s gaze until Brian pulls away, standing up to start pacing back and forth across the bedroom.

“Son of a bitch! What the hell was she thinking?!”

Justin feels like he should defend Debbie, even if his subconscious has cast her as the villain in a few horrendous nightmares. “I don’t think she knew I was there, Brian.”

It makes Brian stop pacing and look at him again, at least.

“That doesn’t matter. Why the fuck did she even have the goddamn bat in the first place? Did she just forget? How the fuck do you fucking forget something like that?”

“Brian--”

There must be something more in his voice than Justin can hear, because Brian stops ranting and presses his lips together. “Shit. You’re not the one who needs to hear this. Especially right now,” he adds under his breath, although he’s close enough that Justin can hear the words. “Are you okay? I mean, now; are you okay, now?”

Justin shrugs half-heartedly. “I guess so. But...”

“What?” Brian gives him his full attention, and it’s a heady sensation, one that reminds Justin of their first night together, before either one of them had this extreme aversion to a piece of wood. There is also that same feeling of being a little too aware of how young he is, and how much in awe of this man in front of him.

It’s pathetic and cowardly, and it makes him feel eight years old, but, “I don’t want to fall asleep, again,” Justin says to Brian’s feet, unable to watch his face during this particular confession. The next words catch on something in his throat, but he forces them out into the air, even though it leaves him raw and exposed. “I don’t think I can handle another nightmare, tonight. Don’t let me fall asleep, again, okay?”

Brian glances briefly at the alarm clock beside the bed, and Justin knows that there are still too many hours until the morning to accommodate this favour, but he loves Brian just a little bit more for simply saying, “Okay. Get your ass out of bed, Sunshine, and figure out which movie you want to watch. I’ll make some coffee.”

Justin lets out a long sigh and closes his eyes for a moment, then smiles a little and opens them again so that he can see Brian's face. "Thank you."

"Just make sure it's something I can stomach. It's too fucking early for any animated Beatles shit."

It feels good to laugh, even a little bit, and Justin gives Brian a long thank-you kiss on his way to the TV and the eclectic selection of DVDs that reveal the undeniable influence of both Brian and Justin. They're proof that the two of them live here, together, and that's something Justin has always loved.

When Brian comes over with the coffee, Justin is sitting in the middle of the floor in a jumbled pile of blankets he appropriated from the bed, and Brian joins him there. He reaches for the remote and presses play, and when the movie starts, Brian turns to look incredulously at Justin.

"...What?"

Brian isn't buying it. "I said something I could stomach, not something I wanted to throw back up."

"Shut up," Justin says, setting aside his cup of coffee so that he can lie down with his head on Brian's lap. "It's got Marlon Brando in it."

"It's fucking Guys and Dolls, Justin."

"Yes. With Marlon Brando."

"Singing and dancing," Brian complains, his hand reaching down to stroke Justin's hair. "That's not the right Brando."

"It's a movie with Marlon Brando and Frank Sinatra in it. Shut up and watch; you might even like it. Just don't let me fall asleep," Justin adds quietly.

Brian is silent for a minute, and his hand stills in Justin's hair, but then he starts the stroking again and says just as quietly, "I promise."

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Brian takes Justin over to Daphne's once it's an acceptable hour of the morning. He'd called her while Justin was in the shower to let her know he needs her to keep Justin occupied and happy, and after he drops Justin off and watches Daphne open the door and let him in, Brian heads straight for Debbie's. He needs to give her a large, uncensored piece of his fucking mind about her thoughtlessness the day before. Brian really doesn't know what it is about the Novotnys that they can't seem to remember how horrific the bashing was. He sure as hell can't forget it. And even though he isn't about to hit Deb in the face, she needs to know that what she did was just as unacceptable as what Michael said two years ago, if not more so.

Christ, hadn't the poor kid been through enough the first time around, without people he loved brandishing goddamn bats in his face? Brian has developed such a loathing of the fucking things he can't even walk past a sporting goods store without his heart beating a little too fast.

When Carl answers the door, Brian experiences only a moment's pause—he's still not used to Carl living here, too. He steps inside and listens with a clenched jaw as Carl warns him that Debbie is a little hung-over after a late night drinking with Loretta to celebrate facing down Loretta's husband.

Apparently, Debbie doesn't see anything wrong with what she did, and Brian is all for people standing up to their spouses and getting out of marriages that are nothing but death traps to begin with, but there are a lot better ways to face down an asshole than with a fucking baseball bat. Shit. It's only been a few years. How could Deb forget what a menace those goddamn things are?

Brian walks into the living room and sees Debbie lying prone on the couch. She sits up to say hello, and he finds himself talking before he's even worked out what he wants to say.

"What the fuck were you thinking? Have you lost your goddamn mind?!" He barely refrains from screaming the question at her, and she stands up, getting the same look on her face she does when she's about to berate him for something he's done to Michael.

"Don't you take that tone of voice with me, you asshole. This is my house, and while you're in it, I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your fucking mouth."

"No, Deb. This time, you're the one who was way the fuck out of line, and you owe Justin a big, fat, fucking apology."

She looks confused, and the fact that she doesn't get it even now makes Brian that much angrier, the fury burning like acid in his gut and right down to his bones.

"Apology. What the fuck for?"

"He was at the diner yesterday."

“Oh, yeah? So he was there when I made that son of a bitch run away?” She has the fucking audacity to smile, proud of herself for standing up to some asshole and proving once again that she knows how to protect the people she cares about, and Brian experiences that same all-consuming rage that made him punch his best friend in the face. Anyone who created a fucking superhero in his image should have damned well remembered why they named him what they did.

“Christ!” He steps back and starts pacing around the room, because even now, Brian refuses to become his father. Squeezing his hands together, he reminds himself that this is the woman who has been a better mother to him than his own ever was, who loves both him and Justin, and it makes the wrath lose a little of its ferocity.

When he knows he can trust himself not to lash out physically, Brian turns back to Debbie, who is staring at him with wide eyes. “That’s not the point, Deb. Justin was there.”

“So? He’s at the diner a lot.”

Brian lets out his breath in one fast exhale. Then he reins in his temper a little more and decides to treat this as if he’s explaining something to Gus. “Justin was at the diner, yesterday. When you threatened someone. With a baseball bat.” The fury rises again as he makes his point and recounts her inexcusable actions.

He can see the moment she realizes, when the enormity of what she did finally hits her. Her face crumbles and her eyes become wet, one hand lifting to press against her chest. Part of him feels sorry for her, because he knows that Justin was right about her not intending to hurt him, but the rest of him can’t stop thinking about Justin screaming in the middle of the night and begging Brian not to let him fall asleep again.

“Oh, my god--Sunshine. Jesus, Brian. I--I’m so sorry,” she says, looking at him desperately. “Is he okay?”

Brian ignores that question, because the answer should be fucking obvious. “What the hell was a bat doing at the diner, anyway?”

“Kiki put it in the back after Darren was bashed. It was behind some boxes in the storage room, and I didn’t even remember it until yesterday. I swear, I didn’t even think about--. And I didn’t know Sunshine was there, yesterday, either. I would never hurt him like that. He’s like my own fucking son,” she adds, her voice suddenly much fainter.

Brian doesn’t want to see this devastation; he has his own to bear. So he pinches the bridge of his nose and says, “I know. But that doesn’t change what you did, or that you did it in front of Justin.”

All Debbie does is nod her head, her eyes getting brighter with the tears he knows she's about to start shedding. He needs to get out of here before that happens, so Brian says what he needs to as quickly as he can, his anger still churning just beneath the surface.

"So this is what you're going to do. First, you're going to get rid of that fucking thing; get it the hell out of the diner—I don't care how—and never touch one of them again."

"Okay," Debbie agrees, and she's quieter than he remembers her being in a long time.

"Then, you're going to apologize to Justin. Without crying all over him and making a huge fucking scene. And don't try to hug him or even touch him unless he makes the first move."

That makes her wince, and he wonders if she's remembering back to when Justin would cringe away from everyone who came near him, everyone except Brian, because that's what Brian keeps picturing every other minute.

"Is he--. How is he?"

A fucking mess, but Justin won't want anyone to know that. "He had a pretty bad night."

She looks almost afraid to ask, but she's Debbie, so she can't help herself. "Will he be alright?"

"He'll be fine." Eventually. "Don't treat him like he's going to break, but go easy on him for the next little while. And try to keep it quiet from the rest of them? The last thing he needs is people feeling sorry for him or smothering him to death."

Debbie nods again. He wishes it were always this easy to get her to stop talking, except he never wants Justin to have to go through something like this, again.

Brian checks his watch and curses to himself. He's late for a meeting with Remson, and he needs about half a dozen more cups of coffee before he can face the rest of this bitch of a day.

"I have to get to work." He turns to leave, but a little voice that sounds a lot like Justin tells him that he can't leave it like this, so he turns back. "Deb."

“Yeah?” She looks more ashamed and unsure of herself than Brian can ever recall seeing her, and he can’t regret giving her this.

“He’s not upset with you.”

It gives her back something, and Brian knows Justin would be glad he said it. Even if the message comes across loud and clear that Brian hasn’t forgiven her. And might not for a very long time.

Part Two

Daphne drops Justin back off at the loft after a day spent at a nearly empty coffee shop gossiping about the guy she’s been seeing and how he’s ridiculously jealous of Justin, but Daphne hasn’t told him Justin’s gay because she thinks it’s funnier this way. She chattered on and on, the whole time, and Justin interjected a few comments as required, mostly just riding the endless, easy wave of her conversation. It meant he didn’t have to think about the events of the day before or the dreams that followed, and Justin was almost pathetically grateful for the reprieve from his own mind. He didn’t want to have to think about whether Brian would expect them to go out that night or if he would be able to sleep through the night without screaming himself awake. He didn’t want to have to think, at all, and Daphne always seemed to know when to carry the conversation.

It was Daphne, and Justin has never been less than comfortable in her presence. She knows him the way no one else does.

The timing of their little outing does not go unnoticed, of course. He’s fairly certain Brian had something to do with her call that morning, since Daphne doesn’t get up before ten unless she has to, but he was too grateful for the silent understanding even to consider insisting he can take care of himself, so he leapt at the chance to spend the day with his best friend.

Justin knows he can take care of himself, and so does Brian. But Justin still remembers learning the lesson of knowing when to ask for help, and he finds it’s less humiliating when he doesn’t even have to ask; when Brian picks up the slack without a word and doesn’t hold it over his head. And if accepting help means Justin doesn’t have to whore himself out to creeps like the fucking Sap, or spend the day alone after a particularly vicious round of nightmares, well, Justin can swallow his pride for that.

He’s done it before.

As he climbs the stairs up to the loft, Justin is struck by the memory of the first time he came here after being released from the hospital, and how hard it was to make it this far on his own. All of a sudden, the memories of that fucking awful time in his life--a time he has tried very hard to forget, to put behind him--seem far too close and familiar, crowding around him like over-eager tricks desperate to get inside him. He pushes them back, but they don’t go far, and he doesn’t like the way they circle around and look for weak spots in his defenses.

He'll have to be vigilant, tonight, and guard his dreams as best he can.

Fuck.

Every time he thinks he's gotten over what happened, some new horror rises up to smash him over the head again with how far he hasn't come. He hasn't dealt with what Chris Hobbes did to him, not really, and Justin's beginning to think he never will. No amount of cathartic artistic expression or gun-toting vigilantism will ever make it go away, and he's just so fucking sick of feeling like a victim. But being on the other side of the weapon didn't do shit to take that feeling away, and he's starting to worry that it might be permanent.

Because it's a part of him, in the way that his memories of that night aren't, and if that isn't the world's worst fucking trade-off, Justin doesn't know what is. And now, after yesterday, it's all too much like the way it was, the way he used to be, and he doesn't know if he can go through all that again.

It took too much out of him the last time.

Justin reaches the top of the stairs and slides the door open, letting out a small sigh of what he refuses to call relief. He steps inside and slides the door closed behind him, locking it carefully. The urge to set the alarm is strong, but he knows Brian will be home soon, and it's almost a game to see if he can withstand not setting it until Brian is inside the loft. Or it would be a game if Justin were sure he could do it.

God, he hates feeling like a cowardly little faggot.

He toes out of his shoes, fighting the urge to kick them across the room the way he used to do when he was a kid, and tosses his jacket onto a stool as he makes his way to the couch. Everything is quiet, but Justin can hear his dreams lurking in the empty corners of the loft, so he turns on the TV to try to drown them out. He had a long and beautiful relationship with television back when he was too fucking scared to head out the door, and it looks as though they're about to have a joyful reunion.

Halfway through a rerun of Law and Order, he hears the elevator and gets up to open the door for Brian. But he doesn't slide it open until after Brian calls out and Justin is sure it's him. It's just a precaution, he thinks, one that they should have been taking all along, especially with all the tricks Brian has brought home over the years, and all the people in Brian's life who seem to come and go through the loft without ever knocking. He can't count the number of times someone has walked in on them when they were naked and in the throes of some debauchery or another.

(Justin remains convinced that he had set the alarm that time back when he was still in high school—half the free world seems to know how to get into Brian's loft and usually does, and he's ninety-nine percent sure the break-in wasn't his fault.)

Brian never gives the appearance of being too bothered by the unwanted interruptions, but Justin has never been one to let people have such easy access to his private space. Or maybe it's just that, after years of never living anywhere that really belonged to him or wasn't on loan from someone who begrudged giving it, he has grown selfish, when it comes to what does belong to him.

But he doesn't want to think about the implications of that idea, so he shakes it off and watches Brian walk in with a huge bag of take-out in one hand and another bag from some music store in the other. Justin slides the door closed behind Brian and makes certain it's locked, conscientiously setting the alarm this time. He tells himself he doesn't do it any faster than usual and that his hands aren't shaking, and then he walks quickly around to the other side of the counter so Brian can't see the shaking that his hands aren't doing.

Maybe he should have scrounged through Brian's stash for his last joint. Just to take the edge off. His mind keeps ricocheting from one thing to the next, and none of the thoughts he's thinking are reassuring ones. He feels rather like an abused pinball, and he just wants to stop slamming into things and careening off into space.

"Hello, darling. How was your day?" Brian asks, and Justin is grateful for the sarcasm that is nothing like how Brian used to treat him after the bashing. He's desperate for something not to feel the way it did back then.

This isn't then, and Justin needs the reminder that he isn't actually drowning in the past, so he takes Brian's cue. "Wonderful, honey; how was yours? Did you have a tough day at the office?"

Brian sets the take-out down and rests one hip against the counter, pulling off his gloves and laying them aside. "My day was pretty much for shit. And since I really can't deal with any other ignorant people today, I thought we might stay in and park ourselves in front of the TV again, for a few hours." He holds up the other bag and shakes it.

The memories make Justin smile a little, and he can't resist. "Oh, really? What movies did you get? Regarding Henry? The Fisher King? My Boyfriend's a Pussy?"

"Now, is that any way to treat someone who just wants to cuddle with you on the couch? Honestly, Sunshine. And after I bought you a present, too."

Justin's smile turns a little more sincere. "So sorry. What did you get me?"

"There's my mercenary boy." Brian pulls something out of the bag and hands it to Justin. "Don't say I never did anything for you."

Justin stares at the objects in his hand, then looks up at Brian in disbelief. "Harry Potter? I love Harry Potter." He does. Daphne brought him the first book when he was in the hospital and there wasn't really anything to do when he wasn't sleeping or in physical therapy. He liked it so much his mother bought him the rest of the books that were out, and he's been a devoted fan ever since.

Harry is a survivor with a head scar, too, and Justin can appreciate that in a person.

Brian shrugs. "I know. I do listen to you, on occasion, you know."

"Thank you." Justin always loves Brian, but there are times when he falls even more in love with him. "You know this means I'm going to make you watch these with me, though, right?"

"I figured as much."

"Just so we're on the same page." Justin looks at the bag, again, and realizes there is something else inside it. "What else did you get?"

Brian's hand disappears inside the bag, but he pauses before he pulls it out. He gives Justin a serious look and raises his eyebrows at him.

"If anyone asks, I bought this for you."

Justin bites the inside of his cheek. "Of course."

Then Brian pulls out another box and holds it so Justin can read the title. It makes him grin.

"Firefly?"

"Not one word, you little shit."

"Of course not." There is something incredibly endearing about Brian's guilty purchase, and the fact that Brian is letting him in on the secret means more to Justin than the knowledge that Brian remembered he loves Harry Potter. Sometimes, it seems as if Justin has had to fight and scrounge for every scrap of information about Brian Kinney he possesses, and to have this one offered to him voluntarily feels vaguely like cheating, but a lot more like he won some contest he forgot he entered.

He looks away from the lettering on the front cover of the box and back up at Brian's face, wanting to understand this side of him. "It's because it's kind of a western, isn't it? At least, that's what I've heard, but I never saw any of the episodes."

Brian hands the box to him while he shrugs out of his jacket and lays it on top of Justin's. "That's because you don't know quality television when it's on. This isn't some lame-ass shit like *Gay As Blazes*. This has strong characters, witty dialogue, and really hot guys. Guys you'd actually want to fuck. The fact that they canceled it before it ran for a full season just goes to show that this country is populated by ignorant fuckers who wouldn't know a good idea if it kneed them in the balls." He bends over to untie his shoes, adding nonchalantly, "I figured it wouldn't kill us to stay in for a few days or so and watch them."

The defensive nature of the speech makes Justin smile, but the comment at the end leaves him momentarily without words. He's grateful to Brian for realizing he can't go out yet—and he knows he can't. It's an enormous relief and a pleasant surprise to know he can avoid the throngs of people at Babylon and instead, stay in and watch DVDs with his partner.

"...I see," he says, finally, finding his voice again, and then he begins tearing off the plastic wrapping of Brian's purchases. "Well, as long as we're watching quality television, who am I to complain?"

"Watch it, Sunshine, or you might be in for another spanking. And this time, don't expect anyone to walk in and save you before you're well and truly punished," Brian says, raising his voice as he disappears into the bedroom to change out of his Armani suit.

"Promises, promises." He throws Brian a wink and a smile, just like the song says, because threats like those deserve that kind of response, and Justin's relief and nervous energy have been known to translate into flirtatiousness before. Besides, it's almost the default setting in his relationship with Brian.

His partner, who would die before ever admitting to being the sweet, thoughtful man he can be when he's not trying to pretend he's the biggest asshole ever to walk the earth.

Of course, Brian's gestures never have just one meaning. This is also an apology for Brian kicking him out of the loft when Justin tried to do this for him, and Justin knows it. He knows Brian, and he wonders why people seem to think Brian can make only the big gestures. It's always been the quiet ones that have meant the most to Justin.

"Bring the food," he calls over his shoulder as he makes his way back toward the TV, shaking his ass just enough to get away with the order, "and grab some beer."

Justin can hear Brian grumbling about not being anyone's fucking servant, and he closes his eyes for a moment and just listens to the familiar sound of Brian's footsteps as they cross from the bedroom to the kitchen. The weight of these noises is comforting. If he has to stay in and hide from the monsters in his own mind, at least he has the best and hottest company anyone could ever want.

Things aren't so bad.

"Which do you want to watch, first? Space-western quality television or boy-saviour goes to private school to learn magic?"

Brian sits down next to him and hands him a beer, then starts lifting containers of Thai food out of the bag. "I've had good luck starting things with schoolboys in uniforms."

That brings Justin's head up, and he looks over at Brian, casually arranging the food in front of them. It's amazing. Every once in a blue moon, Brian will say something or do something, be romantic in the most offhand ways, and every single time he does it, it knocks Justin on his ass. And since Justin is never allowed to acknowledge said action or words overtly, all he can do is stare at Brian and think how grateful he is that Brian took him back after the temporary insanity that was the Ethan debacle.

No that staring at Brian is a hardship, or even anything new. Brian has been Justin's best and most constant model for years, although he can't say that he stares at Brian only for inspiration.

Eventually Brian can't ignore Justin's gaze any longer, and when he looks up, Justin leans over and kisses him. He slides his hands into Brian's hair and his tongue into Brian's mouth, and he thanks him the best way he knows how—without getting naked, which is something Justin wants to save for later. The kiss is warm and wet and full of everything he can put into it to tell Brian what he is thinking and how much Brian means to him. When he pulls back, he is breathing heavily, and Brian's eyes are dark and hot.

It's a look Justin has always loved on Brian, and he paints it again in his mind for the millionth time, even as his eyes flicker down to Brian's crotch just long enough to confirm that yes, Brian is as hard as he is. It's such a shame he really wants to see the movies Brian bought him, because Justin is starting to crave the feeling of Brian thick and hard and thrusting deep inside him. But he's never actually seen the Harry Potter films, and he's kind of hungry, too, so he tells his body it's just going to have to wait.

But first, there's something he needs to say, and he won't let Brian stop him, because it's not often that Justin thinks he can get away with saying it without Brian almost running away. At the moment, Brian is being nice to him, and Justin intends to take shameless advantage of that fact so he can say this without retribution.

And he has to say it. Brian tends to ignore him when he does, or find some way to make him regret speaking the words out loud, but Justin decides that even if he's scared shitless to go outside right now, he doesn't have to be a coward about everything. So he takes a breath and lets it out and tells Brian that he loves him. He says it simply, because he's stating a rather obvious fact, and they both know it, but then he adds something else. "You know that, right?"

Brian's eyes glance away, then back. He doesn't say anything, but after a moment, he dips his chin in a small nod.

"Good. Don't forget." Then, before it all becomes shamelessly sentimental and Brian has to say something cruel to defuse the situation, Justin moves away toward the TV, gliding his hand down Brian's neck and off his shoulder in a lingering caress.

But Brian's hand on his wrist makes him turn back. "Justin."

He can't finish, can't say the words, but something dark and unfathomable behind his eyes is pleading with Justin to understand.

Justin allows himself one quick smile, one of the ones that earned him his nickname, because it's more than he thought Brian would ever give him. He kisses Brian again, briefly this time, but it's still enough to make them both a little breathless when he pulls away, and after, he rests his forehead against Brian's for a minute.

Then he moves back and crawls away to put the disc in the player, giving Brian the chance to have a little space and ogle his ass. He grabs the remote and crawls back again, settling in and leaning ever so slightly against Brian. Justin picks up his chopsticks and pulls one of the containers of food toward him, but as the menu appears on the screen in front of him, he glances over at Brian, again, unable to stop himself.

Brian catches him at it. "What?"

"...Nothing," Justin says, turning his attention back to the screen and the food in front of him.

* * *

That night, Justin makes it until four a.m. before the nightmares have him screaming them both awake, and this time he doesn't have to ask Brian to keep him from falling back to sleep. He wipes his hands angrily across his wet face, but Brian pulls them down and holds them against his chest. He throws one leg over Justin's hip and uses it to pull

Justin in closer, and in the wee dark hours of the morning, Justin allows himself to take all the comfort he can get. Brian holds him, his head tucked in close to Brian's neck, until they decide it's time to get up and have a shower.

As they step into the light of the bathroom, Justin can see that Brian's eyes are heavy-lidded from lack of sleep. He curses himself and tries to tell Brian how sorry he is for waking him up, but Brian tells him to shut up and washes Justin's hair for him, instead.

Justin's just relieved there was no panic attack this time.

He closes his eyes and leans against Brian's wet body, focusing on the feeling of Brian's hands in his hair and thinking that if there were a mirror that showed your heart's desire, this is what he'd see.

Part Three

They are barely dressed when the knock on the door startles Justin into dropping the piece of toast in his hand.

He stares at it, at the way it landed raspberry-jam-side down, and he can practically hear Brian's teeth sink into his tongue. He supposes it's better for Brian's dental records than him grinding them. As Brian walks toward the door, Justin wets a paper towel and crouches down to retrieve the toast and wipe away the mess of jam. He's tossing the toast in the trash when he hears her voice, and he freezes a second, before pasting a smile on his face and turning around.

Debbie looks guilty, and of all the expressions Justin has seen her wear, this has never been one of them. The first words she says to him are, "I'm so fucking sorry, honey. I never should have had that thing in the diner, and I never should have done what I did."

Justin's eyes slide to the left, where Brian is standing next to him, and he notices the tension in Brian's shoulders and the way he avoids Justin's gaze, but stays close by him.

He looks back at Debbie. "I know you didn't mean anything by it. It's okay."

She's already shaking her head. "No, it's not okay, Sunshine. It was a shitty thing to do, and I can't tell you how fucking sorry I am, baby."

And so it goes. She apologizes. Again. And again. And Justin tells her it wasn't her fault, and that he forgives her. "There's no harm done, Deb. Really. I'm fine; it just startled me, that's all. It's not that big a deal."

He can tell she doesn't quite believe him, nor should she, and out of the corner of his eye, he sees Brian press his lips tightly together and turn his head away.

It's surprisingly less dramatic than Justin is used to from Debbie, and he realizes he has one more reason to be grateful to Brian. He knows he wouldn't be able to handle Debbie at her most histrionic. Not yet. Not today.

As it is, she apologizes so many times Justin can feel himself growing increasingly irritated at being the one to reassure her that everything's alright. It's not right, and it's not fair, but he resents it all the same. After ten minutes of the same sentiments being expressed over and over in an endless round, when Justin starts to shift from one foot to the other and his eyes begin to skip around from one object to the next, Brian steps forward and tells Debbie they have plans and it's time for her to go.

She doesn't try to hug him, and even though Justin can tell she wants to, can see her arms twitch a little in anticipation, he can't make himself give her that. He's still too jumpy. And part of him doesn't forgive her. Can't forgive her, doesn't know how to, although he'd never tell Deb that. Besides, he knows Brian must have said something to her to make her realize she had something to apologize for, in the first place, and he's pretty sure Brian wasn't so forgiving, because he didn't say a word to her after he let her in until he told her it was time to go. And he didn't move from Justin's side the entire time she was there.

There is a certain amount of shame in how relieved Justin is to see her go. Debbie has always been comforting, soothing, in a brash sort of way, and he's never felt anything but loved when he's been in her presence. Except that all that has changed, and she doesn't feel anything like safe, anymore, and Justin hates that. He hates that something as stupid and trivial as a goddamn baseball bat can alter so fundamentally his relationship with the woman who is his second mother.

So there is anger, too, in the midst of all the shame and relief he feels when Brian ushers her out the door and slides it shut behind her.

There's a kind of restless fire underneath Justin's skin, or maybe it's more like an uneasy prickle. He feels as though he should be doing something, fighting something, but there isn't anything to fight, because it's all in his mind and in his memories, even the ones he can't access. There should be something he can hit, he thinks, except he knows from very personal experience that violence does fuck-all to resolve anything. He wants to run, but he carries his demons with him. There's nowhere to go to get away from it all.

So they don't leave the loft that day, because it's Saturday, and they don't have anywhere to be. Instead, they spend the day watching a few episodes of 'quality television' in between bouts of fucking. The first time, Brian is gentler than usual and makes sure Justin comes at least twice—long, drawn-out, blindingly intense orgasms that leave him blissed-out and panting. But after that, all bets are off, and it's hard and rough and feels so fucking good Justin doesn't ever want it to stop.

Here, in this bed (or on this couch or against this pillar or on this table), there is no Chris Hobbes and there is no bat. There is nothing but him and Brian, and Justin can give himself over to the sensations sparking and burning through his body.

Mindless pleasure is the best kind of thoughtlessness, and it's the kind he and Brian have always been best at.

* * *

Justin wakes up twice that night, but there are no screams; only the usual sweating and crying and ragged breathing. Brian convinces him to fall back asleep both times, and in the morning, they both look and feel a little more well-rested.

After they shower, Justin makes French toast and convinces Brian to eat two slices, and when he insists on whipped cream and strawberries, they wind up sticky and sated and with the desperate need for another shower.

It's the best kind of morning routine, and Justin forgets for a few hours.

But once they're dressed again, Justin can see the restlessness in Brian's eyes, so he sends Brian out to go talk to Michael and see if they can get past the latest obstacle in their friendship.

When Brian leaves, the silence rises up from the floor and coils around Justin's feet. Twenty minutes later, he's on the phone to Daphne and offering advice on how to give a better blow job and suffering her teasing about his infatuation with Hayao Miyazaki.

Brian isn't back yet by the time Justin gets off the phone, and he can't stand being caged by his own fears, so he forces himself to leave the loft and walk to the convenience store three blocks away for two bottles of iced tea and some licorice and microwave popcorn.

If they're having movie night again, they really should have the appropriate food choices.

He's breathing hard by the time he walks through the automatic doors, and he's tempted to ask for the key to the restroom so he can close a door behind him and breathe, but instead, Justin makes his selections and pulls the cash

from his pocket with a strained smile on his face. He walks a little faster on the way home, but when he's back inside the loft again, Justin feels rather proud of himself.

When Brian walks through the door half an hour later, Justin looks up from his sketchpad and grins. Brian raises an eyebrow when he notices Justin's purchases on the counter, but he doesn't say anything. Justin asks him how things went with Michael, and Brian shrugs.

"It was Mikey. He said he couldn't come to the club because they had Jenny Rebecca that night."

Justin frowns. "Then why did he say he'd come, if he knew he wouldn't be able to make it, anyway?"

Brian shrugs again and raises one hand to rub the back of his neck.

Justin stands up and walks over to Brian. He puts his arms around Brian's neck and forces Brian to look at him. "Hey. He's being an asshole. He does that. He's Michael."

A tight smile is the only response, and Justin makes a mental note to tell Michael to stop being a prick. "Give him time. Once he gets over the initial high of the idea that he has a daughter, he'll remember that he's been obsessed with you for years, and then you two will be bestest buds again."

Justin yelps when Brian pinches his ass, but before he can ask what the hell that was for, Brian is kissing him, and Justin decides he doesn't really care all that much, anyway. Before he knows it, he is flat on his back on the bed, and he thinks that a pinch isn't such a bad thing if it gets him this.

Afterward, with Brian collapsed heavily on top of him, Justin finds himself smiling. He loses his smile though, and holds Brian tighter, when he feels something mumbled against his neck that sounds like, "Fuck Mikey."

* * *

On Monday, they go out to the diner for breakfast, but Brian spends so much time inside Justin in the shower that they miss the morning rush and find themselves almost the only customers. Emmett and Ted show up when they're nearly finished eating and join them in their booth, and when Justin moves involuntarily closer to the wall when Emmett slides in next to him, Brian hooks his feet around Justin's ankle and reaches across the table to play with the fingers on Justin's right hand.

Emmett raises an eyebrow when he notices, but he doesn't say anything, and Justin is thankful Emmett has learned not to draw attention to Brian's occasional public overtures. He and Brian leave soon afterwards, and Brian lets him hold his hand as they walk home. (It's a nice day, and it seems that the car was acting up, so Brian insisted they walk.)

If they take the long way home and Justin's fingers hold Brian's so tightly they are streaked blood-red and corpse-white beneath the skin, neither one of them says anything about it.

Words have never been their best form of communication.

On Tuesday, Brian calls Justin and asks him to bring him some research on a new client that he'd forgotten at the loft. It takes Justin two attempts and one near-panic attack a few blocks from the office when the bus lets on a swarm of students and Justin barely makes it to the next stop, but he walks into Kinnetik only half an hour later than he should have been. Brian thanks him without commenting on the sheen of sweat on Justin's face or his clammy hands, but he tells Justin to stay, because he's leaving early today, anyway, and he'll give Justin a ride home.

Apparently, the car is back from the shop and running fine, now.

That night when Justin wakes up, he is confused. He isn't gasping for breath or sweating, and he doesn't remember any nightmare visions, so he doesn't know why he's awake. He does seem to be shaking, though, and it takes him a minute to realize that it's Brian who is trembling, but his arms are wrapped so tightly around Justin that he's making Justin's body shake, too. Justin tries to turn over to face Brian, but the arms around him tighten in a vise.

"It's okay. I'm not going anywhere; I'm just going to roll over." He says it as quietly and firmly as he can, and after a while, Brian loosens his hold enough to allow Justin to turn in his arms. Brian won't open his eyes, so Justin puts his arm around him, sliding it up Brian's back and into his hair. He wriggles closer and kicks the sheets a little until he can untangle his left leg, and then he raises it and hooks it over Brian's hip and presses his heel against the small of Brian's back, stroking Brian's hair steadily with his fingers. Brian shudders once, then hides his face against Justin's neck.

Justin keeps himself wrapped around Brian for the rest of the night.

He knows how to deal with Brian's nightmares, too.

* * *

Two days later, Justin invites Daphne over, and they smoke half of Brian's stash and eat three bags of potato chips they find hidden behind the rice cakes in the cupboard, before finally seeing the light and ordering a pizza. When Brian comes home and finds them stoned and trying to clean the tomato sauce stain off his white couch, he throws Daphne out and yells at Justin for ten minutes, pacing back and forth across the hardwood floor and gesturing wildly with his arms.

And Justin starts to breathe again.

After Brian finishes ranting and stalks toward the bathroom, Justin follows him into the shower and begs for forgiveness on his knees and is granted it in the choked sound of his name echoing against the glass walls.

In fact, he apologizes so well and so sincerely that after their first round that night, Brian hands Justin the condom and turns over onto his stomach. For a moment, Justin wants to scream at Brian that he doesn't need anyone's fucking pity, but the way Brian raises his ass slightly and spreads his legs makes him take a closer look at Brian's face, and what he sees there makes him close his mouth on the bitter words and kiss Brian instead.

The sound Brian makes when Justin pushes inside removes all question that this is pity.

* * *

When they start making their presence gradually known again at Babylon, Justin is glad Michael doesn't go out as often, now, because it means they don't have to explain why they've been away for ten days. Emmett and Ted have both been preoccupied, so they don't notice anything, either, and Debbie hasn't breathed a word to anyone about what happened.

It's a miracle, but it's one Justin isn't going to question.

There are a few tense seconds when Justin walks through Babylon's front door, but then it's like they never left, and he grinds happily against Brian on the dance floor for the rest of the night.

Things are returning to normal, and Brian has stopped treating him like he's going to shatter into pieces at any moment.

The third time they go to Babylon, Brian even ditches Justin on the dance floor and heads to the back room for a quick fuck from a random trick. Justin glares at him the whole way back to the loft, and they have hot, angry sex against the door, followed by even hotter make-up sex on the bed.

And in the morning, Justin can feel an almost seismic shift of things settling back into place.

Nevertheless, it takes a few weeks for the nightmares to die down to the level they were at before the Incident At The Diner, which is what Justin has taken to calling it. (Brian calls it Deb's Big Fucking Mistake, and Justin has given up telling him not to call it that.) In the meantime, while their nights remain somewhat less than restful, Brian takes naps on the couch in his office and gets Cynthia to keep it quiet from Ted. The circles under Justin's eyes are explained away as late-night artistic fervor and a bad case of the flu, and no one really questions the explanations. They're too busy living their own soap operas, and Justin knows he's never been as much a part of the group as everyone else.

For once, he's thankful that he's the never-quite-fully-accepted newcomer, even after four years, because at least it means he doesn't have people hovering over him the way he did after the bashing.

* * *

One day, a little over a month after the Incident (or the Big Fucking Mistake), Justin walks into the loft and sets something down on the coffee table in front of Brian.

He looks up from the papers in his hand. "What the fuck is this?"

Justin grins, unwinding his scarf from around his neck and taking off his jacket. "I got you something. Open it and at least pretend to be grateful, asshole."

Brian reaches into the bag and pulls out two items. He stares at them for a while, then raises his eyes and glares. "Justin..."

Justin flops down onto the couch next to him and picks up the larger of the two boxes. "Well, since you like Firefly so much, and I found it to be at least mildly entertaining," he says, ignoring the scoffing noise, "I thought maybe you might want to try Joss Whedon's earlier work."

"You bought me Buffy The goddamn Vampire Slayer, Justin."

He bumps his shoulder against Brian's and smiles a little wider, a little more mischievously. "Yep. The complete series. Daphne swears it's an amazing show. She started watching it back when it first aired, and she loves it. And if you like it, she says when we finish the third season, to buy Angel, too. Lots of pretty guys."

"Justin."

"Brian."

To be honest, Justin was expecting this reaction from Brian, but he has the suspicion Brian might be a closet Buffy-fan, already. There's no way he didn't sample at least a few episodes after he fell in love with Firefly. Part of the reason Brian is so successful at his job is his detailed research into his clients and their products, and Justin's sure that Brian is just deeper in the Buffy-closet than he is in the Firefly-closet. For someone who makes no apologies for the way he lives his life, Brian is astonishingly, hypocritically, terrified of losing his reputation as the coolest, hottest fag in Pittsburgh.

But Justin's on to him. Brian was a chemistry geek in high school, after all, and once a geek, always a geek. Justin's long since embraced his inner nerd. He knows it's nothing to be ashamed of.

Brian just stares at him for a while, then rolls his eyes and holds up the second box. "And this?"

"Deadwood. You'll like it; trust me. It's a western, one with actual cowboy hats, but it's gritty and unapologetic, with lots of swearing and some really creative insults involving genitalia. It's like Shakespeare in the Old West with a coarse language warning. And there's a really hot main character."

Justin thinks he sees Brian's lips quirk a little at the mention of cowboy hats, and he congratulates himself on knowing that there is never a wrong time to bring up his pole-dancing days.

"Don't worry," Justin reassures him. "We don't have to watch them all at once. Maybe we could do a few episodes one or two nights a week or something."

And there it is.

He tries not to hold his breath, tries not to make more of this than it is, but both of them know there is more here than two DVD box sets. Justin is making an offer, or maybe he's asking for something--he's not exactly sure. But he does know that what he has quite literally put on the table means something significant for their relationship.

It would mean one or two more nights a week they won't go to Babylon. One or two nights a week when it would be just Brian and Justin, and no tricks.

And there are eight seasons worth of television sitting in front of them, with the option for at least five more.

Justin looks at Brian. Brian looks at Justin. The silence is thick, but not with tension. It's more like anticipation, like the beginning of something, and it's so heavy in the air, Justin can practically taste it on the back of his tongue, can almost see it coalescing between them, and he struggles not to blink. He holds Brian's gaze without any doubt or hesitation.

Brian speaks first. "Okay."

"Really?" Justin smiles suddenly, bright and brilliant, and he watches as Brian smiles a little, too. Their eyes remain fixed on each other, and in his head, Justin thinks words like nascence and germination, commencement and inception.

"Sure. But I get to pick the next show, because I'm not sure I trust you not to bring home something like the Powderpuff Rangers, or whatever the fuck they are."

Justin wrinkles his nose. "Okay."

It's such a little thing, except that it's not.

It's an agreement, a plan for the future, even if it's only a small one. It makes Justin ridiculously happy and relieved, and he finds he doesn't feel as tired and old as he has the past year or so. Or maybe even longer than that. He's so giddy he's not even going to correct Brian about the Powerpuff Girls, even though that defense has almost become automatic over the years. Instead, Justin moves closer and lays his head against Brian's shoulder, just for a moment, sighing a little when Brian shifts to put his arm around him.

It feels like a tradition they've started, like some kind of commitment. There is a sensation of permanence Justin hasn't had since before he came out to his parents. It's not rings or vows or a mortgage on a house in the suburbs. No, it's something better, because it's Brian and Justin, and it's something they can have without giving any of themselves up or feeling like they're missing out.

It feels right.

And later, when Brian decides he really doesn't want to go to Babylon that night, and they order Thai food and pull all the blankets off the bed again and settle in front of the TV, Justin thinks it might be one of the best nights of his life.

End

Season Five

(Visual Aids epilogue)

Timeline: several months after the end of Visual Aids

Warnings: a bit cracky, swearing, spoilers for season 5 of Buffy the Vampire Slayer

One of Justin's Christmas presents for Brian has a bit of a mixed reaction.

"I can't believe she's dead." Justin tries to sniff quietly, but Brian tosses a box of Kleenex in his lap, anyway.

"They killed her," Brian says incredulously. "She actually died. What the fuck kind of show did you buy me, Justin? Who the hell kills off the goddamn main character of a hit television series?"

Justin twists to avoid the punishing pinch to his ass, but the move is pointless when they're sitting practically on top of each other. "I didn't know," he says. "Daph didn't warn me they killed off Buffy the fucking vampire slayer."

He can feel the slow expansion and contraction of Brian's ribs as he sighs heavily, and Justin braces for the imminent outburst. Brian on a tirade – when it's not against him – is glorious and exhausting, but all he gets is, "There are still two more seasons, though, right?"

"Yeah." Justin is wary.

"So call Daphne and find out why the fuck they killed her and how they fixed it."

Justin's already shaking his head and bracing for a fight. "No way in hell. I don't want her to spoil anything for me. I'm not talking to Daphne until we've watched the next few episodes and found out ourselves how Buffy comes back."

Surprisingly, Brian hesitates for only a minute for capitulating. "Fine. But you need to go take your hundredth bathroom break and get whatever you're going to want from the kitchen for the next few hours, Sunshine, because we're not stopping until they bring her back and we know exactly how and why. It's a good fucking thing your ass has padding."

Justin slaps Brian's arm automatically, but he did just finish a large glass of juice and he is getting kind of hungry again, so he unwinds himself from Brian and heads for the bathroom. A few minutes later, he's in search of sandwich components and the bag of pretzels Brian is hiding behind the rice cakes he never eats on the top shelf of the uppermost cupboard – the one Justin has to climb on the counter to reach.

He comes back with the food and two bottles of water just as the menu appears on the screen, but Brian waits for him to arrange everything on the coffee table in front of them before pressing play. They are barely past the opening credits when the banging on the loft door begins, and Justin groans loudly, already resenting the person outside the door.

"Leave it," Brian says shortly, adjusting the volume. "They'll go away, eventually."

That makes Justin turn his head slowly to stare at Brian. "When have you ever known that to happen? Denial is not a good look on you, Brian." Sure enough, there comes the sound of a key being inserted in the lock, and Brian pauses the DVD reluctantly, sending an irritated glare Justin's way that turns quickly to confusion as the lock is rattled fiercely, but the door remains closed.

“Brian!” Their heads turn toward Michael’s voice as it comes through the door. “Brian! What the fuck is wrong with your door? I can’t get in! Brian! Let me in! Bri-an!” There is more banging and then a long silence, before they hear, “Fuck!” and the half-hearted kick of Michael’s shoe against the door, and then his footsteps fade as they move away and down the stairs.

A triumphant grin breaks across Justin’s face, the kind that earned him his nickname, accompanied by the most profound feeling of peace suffusing his body like the really good drugs they gave him in the hospital. Brian is looking at him, his bewilderment endearingly reminiscent of Gus at his most innocent, and Justin can feel the grin slipping into a smile at the resemblance.

“I changed the locks,” he says with a shrug, and he’s been waiting for this to happen, for his decision to have its intended consequences, but he can’t deny he’s a little worried about how his confession will be received.

“You what?”

“I had the locks changed the other day.”

Brian’s tongue starts prodding at the inside of his cheek and both his eyebrows rise almost into his hairline as he processes the information. “Then how have I been getting into the loft?”

“I put the new key on your ring. I gave a spare to my mother in case of emergencies, but she won’t use it unless it is an emergency. A real emergency.” He thinks about it for a minute. “And even then she’ll probably knock first.” Brian doesn’t say anything, so Justin keeps going. “I’ve been harassing them to change the lock on the downstairs door, too, because that fucking thing has been broken for years, and everyone just comes barging up here whenever they want. I’m sick of people walking in on us without any warning or invitation, Brian, usually interrupting us while we’re fucking. I know you hate that. And I’m no prude, but there are some people I just don’t think should be seeing my ass as frequently as they do, and I live here, too, n—”

Brian’s lips cut off the rest of Justin’s words, damming them up inside his mouth until Brian teases them across into his with his tongue. The kiss is hard, demanding, and it has so much of Brian in it that Justin opens wide and tries to take in everything he can, because he can never have enough Brian. His allergies threaten to reassert themselves for a minute, but he manages to focus on Brian’s lips and Brian’s tongue and Brian’s hand sliding down the back of his pants, and his eyes stop prickling soon enough. If there weren’t the fate of a slayer hanging in the balance, this kiss would lead to sex, Justin knows, but as it is, they let the intensity gradually bleed off and away until Brian pulls back and rests his forehead against Justin’s for a moment. Justin savours the ebb and flow of Brian’s breath ghosting over his face and then leans in to leave a kiss at the corner of Brian’s eye, offering his own silent declaration before settling once more against Brian’s side as they return their attention to the more pressing matters. For the time being.

Brian picks up the remote and tosses an approving smile sideways at Justin. “You always were a smart little fucker. I have excellent taste in men, even if I do say so myself.”

Laughing, Justin bumps his shoulder against Brian’s. “Aside from me, your taste in men is actually a little terrifying. Did you ever take a good look at some of the trolls you’ve fucked over the years?”

“Shut up, princess,” Brian says, pressing play once more and pulling Justin roughly in to his side. “There’s a resurrection about to happen, and I’m actually interested in this one.”